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Religion, Schooling, Community and Security: Exploring Transitions and Transformations in England

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Abstract:

Education is a complex social practice. In the UK context, schooling is further nested within the complex social practices of community governance, quasi-market public choice, and religion. This essay explores the shifting definitions of community and education in the context of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 which places a duty on all public bodies, including schools, to prevent violent extremism. Drawing on analyses of the ‘Trojan Horse’ moral panic in Birmingham schools in 2014 and guidance documents operationalizing the educational policy changes which followed, two distinct discourses can be observed, derived from different policy directions. The social, concerned with integration and at times assimilation toward national norms, and the communal, concerned with internal cohesion and development within the Muslim community. These can be characterised as societal ‘we identities’ in vertical tension (Buzan 1993).

Community and Society: From Cantle to Casey

It would be helpful for you to use either the lead essay or series introduction as a point of departure or framing for your essay.

Arshad-Ayaz and Naseem (2017) contend that a neo-orientalism frames Muslims as ‘problem subject’ (7) in the national security state. In the case of the UK, this is most evident in a series of policy reports which followed the race riots in Oldham and Bradford in the summer of 2001. Following the assault of a white pensioner by three Asian youths, a demonstration by the far-right National Front on May 5th 2001 became a flashpoint for some of the worst racially motivated rioting since the early 1980s, centred around the ethnically polarized Glodwick area of the town. Rioting subsequently spread to other Northern towns of Bradford, Leeds and Burnley, all of which contained diverse but increasingly polarized populations. Following the events of the summer, the ‘community cohesion’ agenda became a mainstream of UK Labour government policy. A report into the riots compiled by Professor Ted Cantle (2006) problematized a notion of ‘community fragmentation’: disaffected South Asian youth (framed in racial terms) living in a parallel culture to their white peers without meaningful interaction. Similar concerns were voiced by Sir Trevor Phillips, then head of the

Commission for Racial Equality, when he warned that parts of Britain were ‘sleepwalking into segregation’ (2005). Within months of the Oldham riots, however, agendas were radically refocussed by the response of the US/UK security apparatus to the events of 9/11 and the subsequent framing of the ‘War on Terror’. While elements of the community cohesion agenda continued to focus on far right radicalization, the discourse largely shifted from a racial to a religious enframing. As I have argued elsewhere (Lundie 2014), the conflation of race and religion and the identification of Religious Studies within schools as the primary vehicle for community cohesion education have led to a significant misunderstanding of core problems in community relations, and a hardening securitization of education has been one of the consequences.

The advent of a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 is often taken to mark the end of an official doctrine of state multiculturalism (Cameron 2011). In place of the emphasis on ‘communities’ in the plural, the Conservative government’s ideological foregrounding of a ‘big society’ and shared ‘fundamental British values’ marked a significant change in emphasis. Within education, it was also presaged by a deliberate disinvestment of resource in subjects taken to represent a ‘soft’ social curriculum: Religious Studies, Personal, Social and Health Education, and Citizenship (Gove 2010) in favour of a curriculum dominated by English, Mathematics and Science. Most recently, the theme of social interaction and segregation has been addressed by Dame Louise Casey in a review which emphasized the importance of programmes such as the National Citizen Service (2016; 53) in promoting social mixing among young people.

Policy Context

Public education in England had since the 1870 Elementary Education Act been organized through local Boards of Education (later Local Education Authorities), responsible for building and allocating school places to all children, although state-funded religious schooling remains a significant presence; Church of England schools account for 23% of the sector, Catholic schools for 10%, both of which are organised into diocesan boards of education with similar remit and structure to Local Authorities, other schools with a religious character account for just over 1% (Clarke & Woodhead 2015). In addition to Local Authorities, however, each school also retained its own Board of Governors, drawn from the local community. Changes to this arrangement began under the Labour government but accelerated in 2010, with schools strongly encouraged to become self-governing Academies

funded directly by national government, or to join successful chains of Multi-Academy Trusts.

Another idiosyncrasy of the English education system is the provision of Religious Studies as a statutory subject in all publicly funded schools. As early as 1870, a clause provided for compulsory 'religious instruction', though from its inception, this was to be non-denominational, not following the catechism or formulary of any one church (Lundie 2012). The unique character of English RS as a subject which is seen as appropriate and essential to public education, but which is required to 'take account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Education (Reform) Act 1988) has lent itself to being the primary vehicle for much community cohesion work in UK schools.

Uniquely, the curriculum for RS is also determined locally by Local Authorities, not by the National Curriculum, a point which was largely overlooked in the transition to Academies. The 'REsilience' programme in schools, active until 2012, required schools to engage with the community cohesion agenda through a program led by the RE Council comprising self-evaluation tools for schools to reflect on diversity in their RS and wider curriculum and with a network of local community leaders who volunteered as mentors to work with schools on reaching out across ethnic and religious divides (Miller 2013). The non-statutory national framework foregrounds the role of the subject in helping young people 'to become more broadminded, to accept other people's beliefs and faiths, and to not let race or religion come in the way of what you see in an individual' (QCA 2004; 6). The presence of 'race and religion' in the rationale for a subject ostensibly concerned with religious beliefs and practices ought to be jarring. There is no *prima facie* reason, besides the neo-oriental enframing of communities (particularly the South Asian community in the context of Britain's colonial history in India) why religion or Religious Studies should be cited as the vehicle for understanding race or racial identities. Yet so ubiquitous has this category mistake become that even the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, the professional body representing RS teachers and faith communities includes among the aims of the subject: 'Gain and deploy the skills needed to... enquire into what enables different individuals and communities to live together respectfully and for the wellbeing of all' (2013; 15). The conflation of religious belief with community identity has problematic consequences both for the framing of intercultural questions (Lundie & Conroy 2015) often presenting religious reasoning as essentialized, monolithic and 'other'.

Nested Identities: Society, Communities, Race and Religion

Education as a social practice is refracted through complex sets of attachments, beliefs and correlated actions. The social practices of religious or community groups establish certain forms and patterns of relationship between individuals within the community, and between the community and others in the political, cultural and social life of society as a whole. Further, religious beliefs are enframed within the cultural and social practices of communities, which develop and evolve in sometimes divergent directions. Given the wide variety of relations within and across communities, this inevitably creates a very complex picture of the ways communal and religious interests are transacted and performed in society (Judge 2002). The relationship between religious belief, institutional religious influence in school sponsorship, religious community practices, community school governorship and the pedagogical practice of non-confessional religious studies as a vehicle for community understanding leads to an extraordinarily complex nested social practice (Conroy & Lundie 2017).

Media and policy discourses often perpetuate a 'mythic feedback loop' (Haw 2009) in which religion is resignified to subsume complex inter-connections of race, class, local and intracommunal factors, educational choice, language and community relations. While some have argued that not only public representations but self-representations are constructed by this process of resignification (Mura 2011), research with young people suggests an intracommunal understanding is surprisingly resilient to either media or educational attempts at redefinition (Lundie & Conroy 2015). Young Muslims may experience contradictions between their own loyalties, sense of values and belonging to wider society, and the perceptions and assumptions others make of their religious identity as singular, separate and insular (Bhatti 2011).

To deconstruct this contested plurality of overlapping and recursive social practices, Buzan's securitization theory provides a framework for analysis. Buzan takes the step of separating the political from the societal for the purpose of analysis, even in cases, such as the UK, where the polity and society are largely coterminous. The political sector has its own logic, relating to the organizational security of the state, the system of government and ideological legitimacy (Buzan et al. 1998). The societal sector, in contrast, is defined in terms of 'we identities': ideas and practices identifying the individual as member of a societal group. These groups can include both race and religion (Buzan et al. 1998). Societal groups may be subject to 'horizontal' competition, factors such as changes in cultural and linguistic influence from neighbouring societies and/or migration, as well as 'vertical' competition

from either integration into a larger whole or fragmentation, precisely the factor identified by the Cante report at the outset of this paper. Further, Buzan (2009) articulates four threats which the political sector may pose to the societal: the passing of laws, conduct of political action, struggle for control of the political state or conduct of foreign policy action detrimental to the societal group. These threats may be placed on a spectrum from unintended and structural through to programmatic and deliberate. In the brief analysis of the Trojan Horse affair which follows, numerous societal and political actors hold competing working definitions of community education, and gaps in understanding at the societal level are reinterpreted as security gaps at the political level.

The Trojan Horse

On April 10th 2014 Birmingham City Council announced a formal investigation following publication by a national newspaper of a letter alleging a takeover of a number of the city's public schools by members of a highly conservative current within the Muslim community. On April 15th the Department for Education announced its own investigation, appointing as chair Sir Peter Clarke, former director of counter-terrorism for the Metropolitan Police, a move which local police chiefs described as 'desperately unfortunate'. In total, 4 separate government bodies were engaged in overlapping investigations by the end of April, hindered by open political argument between the Department for Education and the Home Office, responsible for policing and security. The allegation of a concerted takeover was disproved, but significant failings were identified, with over 100 teachers, school leaders and community governors subsequently subject to disciplinary procedures that continued until a High Court appeal in October 2016. Parliament's Education Select Committee was highly critical of the failings and confusion caused by the overlapping investigations, and of the 'rushed... knee-jerk response' of strengthened emphasis on the promotion of British values in schools, values themselves drawn from the Home Office 'Prevent' counter-terrorism strategy (CESC 2015).

Of the 21 schools inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in connection to the affair, 16 were conducted under Section 8 of the inspection framework, in which inspection is focused on a specific identified issue, in this case governance and safeguarding, and a further 5 were comprehensively inspected under Section 5. Of the 16 Section 8 inspections, 12 make explicit reference to Religious Studies, 10 of them in a positive light. This is in stark contrast to the previous inspections of these schools, in which only 3 mention the subject. Such findings are in keeping with a broader discourse of the marginalisation of

RS (Barnes 2008). Of the 5 full reinspections, however, 4 reports comment negatively about RS as ‘unbalanced’, with the exclusive focus on Islam after Year 9 at Park View, for example, being represented as ‘to the detriment’ of students’ development. These findings cohere closely with the findings of the ‘Does Religious Education Work?’ project, which found that the examination syllabus tended to dominate RS in upper years, with syllabi often limited to the study of one religion (Conroy et al. 2013) and that confusion as to the purpose of RS is often masked and elided by agreement over effective pedagogies (Baumfield et al. 2012), with effectiveness frequently defined in terms of examination success. Indeed, in some examples from this research, students felt complicit in daily microinvalidations (Smith 2013) of their cultural perspective in order to meet the demands of an examination syllabus defined without reference to their lived practice of religion.

The overall picture which emerges of the inspection, not only of RS, but of the wider ethos and culture of the schools, I would argue, is one of former neglect by the inspectorate, counterbalanced by sudden intense scrutiny. This stands in stark contrast to the characterising by HM Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw of sudden dramatic decline. With regard to the relationship between community, religion and the school as a socio-political resource, the Trojan Horse moral panic stands at the crossroads of a distinction between ‘community’ governance understood in the sense employed in the Cante Report and the wider political ‘society’ foregrounded by the British values agenda, and the comprehensive religious enframing of the former in the case of the British Asian Muslim community. In response to concerns about undue religious influence, parent governors of the Park View Academy Trust, which ran several of the schools implicated, were clear that they had actively chosen not to designate their organisations as faith schools. Nonetheless, the values of the Muslim community, values derived from a plurality of sources, including British settlement and British colonial history, Pakistani culture and Islamic sources, informed the ethos and values of the schools. As the official guidance for school governorship states,

‘In all types of schools, governing bodies should have a strong focus on three core strategic functions:

- a. Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction’ (DfE 2014; 7).

Arguably, a decision to designate these schools as publicly funded faith schools may have averted much of the adverse attention paid to the Trojan Horse affair. Nonetheless, to do so would also have been to concede to a view of minority communities in general, and the

Muslim community in particular, as comprehensively religiously enframed. The designation of publicly funded non-faith schools as ‘community schools’ was here (mis)interpreted to have the same meaning as in the community cohesion agenda, standing in vertical tension to a picture of national determination of curriculum and inspection frameworks springing from political (and at times policing/security) imperatives rather than societal pluralities.

Prevent and British Values: From Societal to Political

The reauthoring of the Ofsted inspection handbook in 2014 which followed the Trojan Horse affair foregrounded a narrower and more compliance-oriented approach to the National Curriculum entitlement that all schools develop the ‘spiritual, moral, social and cultural’ (SMSC) dimensions of their students. Every mention of SMSC in the revised handbook is accompanied by reference to ‘Fundamental British Values’ of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty and respect and tolerance, values derived from the Home Office ‘Prevent’ counter-terrorism strategy. The passage of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act of 2015 further places a statutory duty on schools and other public bodies to engage with Prevent. This duty further complicates political accountability with both the Home Office and Department for Education producing advice and guidance aimed at schools (Home Office 2015; DfE 2015). At times, this guidance includes subtle differences in framing. So, for example:

‘The prevent duty is not intended to limit discussion of [sensitive] issues. Schools should, however, be mindful of their existing duties to forbid political indoctrination and secure a balanced presentation of political issues.’ (Home Office 2015; 11)

‘Citizenship helps to provide pupils with the knowledge, skills and understanding to prepare them to play a full and active part in society. It should equip pupils to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, to debate, and to make reasoned arguments... Pupils are also taught about the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding.’ (DfE 2015; 8)

Notable here is the shift from a political enframing in the first quote, to a social/civic enframing in the second. The move to locate both critical social enquiry and an understanding of diversity in Citizenship as a curriculum subject, rather than Religious Studies, is also a notable change from previous approaches. RS is not mentioned in either of the guidance

documents. While the recognition that religion is not the primary vehicle either for extremist radicalisation (Roy 2017) nor for the definition of societal identity is a welcome one, the move towards a common, politically determined value-set as the locus of SMSC has very frequently been conflated with the more explicit security focus of the Prevent duty and its' (mis)applications in school. A further concern relates to the un-naming of Islam and the Muslim community in much of the advice and guidance (Smith 2016). Combined with the Trojan Horse context and the wider media narrative (Baker et al. 2013) this attempt at equivocation may be interpreted instead as a form of innuendo towards a 'suspect community' (Awan 2012).

Drawing on this recent policy history, I have traced three transitions: from a racial to a religious enframing of minority communities; from a societal to a political focus for civic values education in schools; from a multicultural-pluralist approach to 'communities' to a whole-polity approach characterised under the rubric of 'British' values. In all of these transitions over the past decade, a more explicit link with the security apparatus of the political state may be observed. This is not to suggest that the security apparatus is itself complicit in co-opting schooling. Interviews with institutional elites involved in the implementation of the Prevent duty (Lundie *forthcoming*) suggest a depth of reflection and understanding about the importance of educational freedom and policing by consent on the part of many of those engaged in the process. A further transition which can be observed among these institutional elites is that from community/public sector to private consultancy – a snowball sample drawing on the social networks of key practitioners in education and policing in two cities to map the key influencers on schools identified 8 private/3rd sector consultants, 5 local government/police employees and 2 teacher educators. Among the consultants which an increasingly networked quasi-independent public education sector (Ball & Junemann 2012) relied upon to develop their response to the Prevent duty, those drawn from a policing background had the potential to frame the policy in a radically different way to those drawn from a teaching background. The formation process of these networks itself owed much to institutional inertias from earlier community cohesion policy enframing which survived the neoliberal dismantling of the institutions whose former purpose had been to promote them (Lundie *in development*). Further analysis of the formation and impact of these new cross-sectoral professions is ongoing. The threat posed by schools taking an unstructured approach to building their professional networks in response to rapid changes to educational policy is that these confusions, conflations and politicizations become entrenched in the

professional culture of the ways schools think about questions of religion, social cohesion and safeguarding.

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